

## Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism

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As scholars working in both Disability Studies and Postcolonial Studies, we are mindful of a number of concerns that arise when we seek to bring together these two fields. The first is our desire to explore the intersections of our interests, and not to have to hold them at a distance from one another because of the arbitrary lines that divide disciplinary areas. Secondly, we are conscious of the fact that, put simply, there has been little sustained analysis of the representation of disability in postcolonial literatures and cultures, nor of the methodological or theoretical bases that the approaches might share.<sup>1</sup> From an initial standpoint, then, there are some basic and foundational reasons to want to establish a dialogue between the two fields. The placement of disability as the active verb in our title, "Disabling Postcolonialism," reflects our feeling that Disability Studies has the potential to make a more urgent intervention into contemporary Postcolonial Studies than vice versa. As we will go on to delineate, Disability Studies has already begun to look toward the important work of globalizing its outlook and methodologies, whereas disability is still almost completely absent from postcolonial theory and criticism, marking a significant exclusion in the field. Even so, as a whole, contemporary Disability Studies

is not especially perceptive in its articulation of global dynamics and there is much work to be done, in both disciplines, to raise awareness and refine research methods. While, in the broadest terms, postcolonial criticism tends to treat disability as prosthetic metaphor, Disability Studies problematically transports theories and methodologies developed within the western academy to other global locations, paying only nominal attention to local formations and understandings of disability. It is these limitations that we want to address here: our central aim is to foster productive exchanges and cross-fertilizations between the two research fields, addressing silences that have existed for too long.

It is clear to us that there are significant questions at stake when considering the multiple forces that come together when we talk of disabling postcolonialism. The temptation to conceive of and express colonial processes and their consequences—postcolonial resistance, anti-colonial nationalism, the development of independent states—using metaphors of disability is all too obvious. The idea that both disability and postcolonialism are, at heart, connected to questions of power is, of course, not misplaced. But it is an error to subscribe to a reading of such notions that thinks predominantly of the power

*relations* involved here in terms of easy models of health, illness, absence, loss, pathology, charity or victimhood, to name just the most recognizable of such categories. These assumptions and tropes frequently haunt the discussion of disability in postcolonial contexts, but we want to argue that, in fact, the details within representations and narratives of postcolonial disability can also be understood to reorient, in a fundamental fashion, our understanding of such disability. We contend that it is in disability's material locations, in all their cultural diversity, that we find potential new forms through which to express disability experiences.

In this article we outline, through a critical investigation of the relevant arguments in each subject area, what we see as the most significant theoretical contributions to the disabling of postcolonialism to date. In addition, we seek to push the integration of the two fields further by articulating exactly *how* we think Critical Disability Studies needs to adapt its assumptions and methodologies to include and respond to postcolonial locations of disability. Here, we identify a number of key terms and approaches—situated analysis, cultural difference, environments of disability, and representational practices—which we believe have the capacity to undo the over-rigid models and vocabularies through which Disability Studies can sometimes function. In turn, we feel that an appreciation of disability, elaborated through these processes, gives greater detail to the understanding of the ways in which postcolonial cultural representations work. At the heart of our enquiry, as the second half of our title implies, is our sense that the integration of these twin viewpoints can be aligned with what Edward Said describes as *democratic criticism*. Our own interpretation of this term refers to a critical method that is sensitive to the particularities of disability as it is experienced in postcolonial societies, and

seeks to further freedom through asserting and questioning knowledge in the process of establishing research methods. We remain convinced that the best end product of such work can make a material difference to people's lives, and this conviction is the base for our thinking throughout what follows.

### EDWARD SAID AND PARTICIPATORY CITIZENSHIP

In terms of potential models that might aid us in establishing the terms of a productive association between postcolonial and disability scholarship, we want to initiate the discussion of such a link through a consideration of the writings of Edward Said. With its focus on the power differential between communities in postcolonial contexts, Said's foundational work offers itself as an instructive guide for all manner of academic fields involved in similar endeavours. Within Disability Studies, both Tom Shakespeare and Rod Michalko have used Said's writings (on identity and exile respectively) to think through particular aspects of disability representations and experiences, and his early and mid-career work more generally displays the kinds of critique of power and representational systems that illuminate similar processes within disability scholarship. When, in a 1985 interview entitled "In the Shadow of the West," Said noted that the "violence" of the "*act* of representing (and hence reducing) others, almost always involves violence of some sort to the *subject* of the representation," or when he asked "what can we do outside of this system [of representation] that enables us to treat it as a productive, rather than a natural process?" (2005: 40, 44), his observations chime with the seminal work of those, such as David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Lennard Davis, who have, since the mid-1990s, sought to unpack the

ways in which stories and images of people with disabilities have nearly always been reductive.

The classic Saidian process of critique, then, is easily aligned, at an appropriate level of abstraction, with the kinds of work disability scholarship has come to practise. In addition, we feel that his late work on humanism, especially in his 2004 text *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (his last completed book, written as Said himself experienced a significant and disabling illness), contains perspectives highly relevant to a discussion of disability. As a postcolonial scholar choosing to stress the values of humanism, a mode of thinking deeply embedded within a European tradition, Said sought to outline a working critique that appears counter-intuitive but has, in fact, radical applications in terms of global relations. Equally, we would claim that his articulation of an idea of the "human," a topic on which it is wise to be cautious given the history of humanism with regard to disability, offers a provocative but potentially progressive approach to the workings of disability in culture. In particular, Said's stress on what he calls "participatory citizenship" provides an inclusive framework within which questions pertinent to both postcolonial and disabled identities can be explored.

For Said, giving detail on this, there is

no contradiction at all between the practice of humanism and the practice of participatory citizenship. Humanism is not about withdrawal and exclusion. Quite the reverse; its purpose is to make things more available to critical scrutiny as the product of human labor, human energies for emancipation and enlightenment, and, just as importantly, human misreadings of and misinterpretations of the collective past and present.

(2004: 22)

He goes on:

In my understanding of its relevance today, humanism is not a way of consolidating and affirming what "we" have always known and felt, but rather a means of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial, and uncritically codified certainties.

(28)

Despite the problematic associations between humanism and disability, then, it is impossible not to see the potential of what Said says here for a progressive method of critique. The processes of "questioning, upsetting, and reformulating" and the attention given to "misreadings of and misinterpretations of the collective past and present" mirror the variety of disability movements and their attempts to demand a sense of "participatory citizenship" when validating disabled experiences. In addition, the example of the radical postcolonial scholar championing what many would represent as a conservative set of ideas asserts what we recognize as the against-the-grain logic of much of the best disability writing.

So it is both the detail and the shape of Said's thinking that offer a productive guide for thinking through the connections between postcolonial and disability scholarship. Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, discussing Said's late style, note that his writing on humanism constitutes a desire "almost single-handedly to re-orient the understanding of the term away from its deeply Eurocentric and elitist grounding to a worldly and multi-faceted consideration of human activity" (2000: 145), and we respond to this both as postcolonial scholars recognizing the challenge to Eurocentric thinking, and as disability scholars alive to the notion of "multi-faceted human activity." Above all, we find in the possibilities of a "participatory citizenship" ideas of democracy, agency and method; Said's thinking parallels the debates around

activist rights discourses *and* the issues of theorizing disability that are so apparent in contemporary writing in Disability Studies. If the Victorian humanism that underpins Said's own conception of the term can, in his words, tell us that "we can really know only what we make or, to put it differently, we can know things according to the way they were made" (2004: 11), then maybe his own example of intellectual scrutiny and expression can also help us to think about what makes "us," in terms of a complex, inclusive humanity.

But, useful as they are, guiding frames still need specifics, and for all that the force of Said's thinking might inspire ideas about the connections between disability and the postcolonial, it is clear that his valorization of humanism will not work across the huge variety of global contexts in which disability is a social and cultural experience. These problems highlight once again the limits of grand theorizing that have bedevilled Postcolonial Studies since the 1980s and doubtless will shadow the attempted development of Disability Studies as the subject seeks to expand beyond its traditional Euro-American base. Mark Sherry has warned of the dangers of abusing the "rhetorical connections" that exist between disability and postcolonialism. "Neither disability nor postcolonialism," Sherry writes, "should be understood as simply a metaphor for the other experience; nor should they be rhetorically employed as a symbol of the oppression involved in a completely different experience" (2007: 21). Following on from this, those practitioners of disability scholarship who have sought to place disability within a global or postcolonial context, or have used the languages of identity politics in a manner common to much postcolonial writing, have often struggled with their accounts of the differing kinds of "experiences" that Sherry highlights here.

The majority of disability scholarship has emerged from traditions that empha-

size local aspects of social application. In Europe and the U.K. especially, such work has stressed the processes of law and governance, with a resulting focus on such issues as community-based social services. In the U.S., where a discourse- and humanities-based model has played a greater part in the development of Disability Studies, it has nevertheless been the case that American examples have predominated. In both instances, there has been an understanding that such models may well have application in non-Euro-American contexts (claims for the social model, for example, assert that it can adapt to the local variants of other cultures), but there has been a singular lack of specificity as to the detail of such applications, especially as they might take into account the nature of cultures shaped by colonization and its consequences. It is this question of applicability that concerns us here. In aiming to develop strategies for postcolonial disability analysis, we aspire toward future scholarship in which the nuanced methods we find in much Euro-American-focused disability criticism are replicated in work on global disability.

## QUESTIONING THE GLOBAL

Disability scholarship that has considered the value of a revisionist global dimension has often asserted the potential of such work in terms of enquiries and questions. "What do we talk about when we talk about global bodies?" asks Robert McRuer in the Epilogue to *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006). His answer, in part, is to recognize that such talk involves movement beyond Euro-American subjects and methods, that the process of globalizing disability might mark a move toward the "extension or completion" of the project that seeks the widest possible integration of disabled lives and experiences into majority cultures (201). At the same time, however, McRuer notes

that this kind of thinking creates an idea of global bodies that “also comes with its dangers,” observing that “[w]hen a field covers a larger terrain and purports to be about everything . . . there is always the danger that trumping, transcending, and even colonizing will displace the more urgent work—especially urgent in these times—of coalition” (201–202), a point equally true of Postcolonial Studies of course. Overall, McRuer’s ruminations on what the global nature of Disability Studies might be open up a number of highly suggestive avenues—a further complication of cosmopolitanism and global neoliberal institutions, an idea of “disposable domesticity” (203)—that invite future work. His intervention in *Crip Theory*, though, is still best seen in terms of such an *invitation*, an acknowledgement that more needs to be done.

The same could be said of the cultural model of disability more generally, particularly as it is expressed in the formative work of Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell. In their *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006), the very idea of “location” is one with obvious appeal to a postcolonial scholarship aiming to highlight specific located examples of disability in cultural contexts, whether that is within colonial processes of classification or post-independence renegotiations of citizenship. When Snyder and Mitchell claim that “[t]he definition of disability must incorporate both the outer and inner reaches of culture and experience as a combination of profoundly social and biological forces,” we see—in the space given here to “culture and experience”—the promise of a productive model allowing for the cultural difference of post-colonial disability to find its expression (7). Yet, for all of the attractiveness of the shape of the thinking here, the work that might go on in any global cultural location of disability remains something gestured towards, and “cultural locations” appears more as a phrase than an actual paradigm.

The conclusion to *Cultural Locations of Disability* moves towards thinking through the issues of the location of Disability Studies as a *subject* (its final mini-chapters are on the institutionalization of Disability Studies and the development of research practices, 194–203) and, while we find such a focus useful, it does not embrace the full potential that the term “cultural locations” might suggest.

Indeed, there is a real sense that the practice of globalizing disability, the implementation of the suggestion as it were, actually works to foreground the limits of current formations of the cultural model. In reality, we find that asking the question of how disability is figured in the global, postcolonial history of the modern points to the closed parameters of what we think we know, rather than opening the door to further scholarship; again, it is still all to be done, with the precise locations of cultures of disability still to be found.

Other practitioners of disability scholarship have entered the debate surrounding culture and representation in ways, and with methodologies supplied by cognate disciplines, that should make their use in any account of postcolonial disability relatively transparent. This is especially the case with Ato Quayson, a noted postcolonial scholar (on both the specific literatures of West Africa and postcolonial culture and criticism more widely)<sup>2</sup> before his research turned toward disability representation in *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007). With its focus on work by Wole Soyinka and J. M. Coetzee, among others, *Aesthetic Nervousness* presents what might seem like a clear entry into a discussion of specific postcolonial disability narratives. To an extent, this is the case: Quayson notes, for example, that Soyinka’s “writing focuses . . . on a set of ritual dispositions drawn from a traditional Yoruba and African cultural sensibility” and that “each of his plays may be read

as partial allegories of the Nigerian and African postcolonial condition" (29). Yet our reading of Quayson's study overall is that it does not seek to make links between disability and postcoloniality at the level of cultural production. As is in fact obvious from his title, Quayson's focus is on questions of aesthetics and form, and subsequently on issues of ethics, and not on the determining question of how postcolonial cultures per se represent disability. For all that it does, *Aesthetic Nervousness* does not offer us a model of how we might conceive the particular interplay of postcolonial cultural history and the depiction of disability, whether individually experienced or socially constructed.

Despite his postcolonial credentials, then, Quayson does not focus on the questions of cultural and personal identity and representation that appear for many as the central axes of any initial account of postcolonial disability. At the other end of the spectrum is Tobin Siebers, whose commitment to identity politics is iterated throughout his disability work. "Identity politics," he writes in the introduction to *Disability Theory* (2008), "remains in my view the most practical course of action by which to address social injustices against minority peoples and to apply the new ideas, narratives, and experiences discovered by them to the future of progressive, democratic society" (15). This is language that has clear connections to the activist roots of much disability scholarship; it is also a statement with a clear relevance to postcolonial contexts in which "injustices" are countered in the name of "progressive" and "democratic" social and cultural formations. For Siebers, the category of the "minority"—whether "minority peoples," "minority identity" or "minority studies"—is essential to the optimism about what he terms, in *Disability Theory*, the "future of identity politics" (70–95). Yet, in his discussions of minorities, Siebers gives virtually

no thought to the processes of globalization or transnationalism and the production of minority identity politics that occur as a consequence of either past empires or the global hegemonic power of current neoliberal formations, especially those of the U.S. When he notes that "[d]isability studies has much to offer future discussions of minority identity and its politics" (95), the statement comes in the final paragraph of his chapter on the topic, and it is apparent that, as with Mitchell and Snyder, Siebers' work—though obviously sympathetic to non-American accounts of disability—has no real sense of what such instances might entail. Most contemporary disability scholarship is, it appears, all in favour of a situated theory and method that can articulate the nature of global postcolonial disability, and is very much aware of the need for such work to complicate current models of how disability is experienced and represented, but it has no real idea of what these processes might actually look like.

We feel it is time to move beyond the gesturing toward a future in which non-Euro-American disability stories, of all kinds, *might* be understood. We believe that detailed and situated analysis is the way to correct the conditional frame of such gestures, and furthermore, to return to McRuer's question, that such a critical approach will enable us to think through what is involved in a concentration on "global bodies." In so doing, we would like this article to build on what we see as the one recent intervention in disability scholarship that does engage with the specifics of globalized disability, namely Michael Davidson's notion of "the work of disability in an age of globalization" (168) in *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (2008). Like other scholars, Davidson asks the pertinent questions—"[w]hat might a critical disability studies perspective bring to the globalization debate?"—but he also offers a working

through of some potential answers. Noting that disability “unsettles a global panacea for health and human welfare,” he asserts that it also “defamiliarizes the seemingly inexorable pattern of capital movement, information exchange, and market integration by which globalization is known” (171, 169). Following this, Davidson’s concentration on poverty and the distribution of wealth, and his assertion of the need “to reevaluate some of the keywords of disability studies . . . from a comparative cultural perspective” (172), gives detail (in his accounts of “development” themes in recent film, or narratives of international organ sales and transplants, for example) to the shape of disability theorizing in global contexts.

### SITUATING DISABILITY CULTURES

Our own analysis aims to supplement Davidson’s globalized perspectives with specific references to postcolonial contexts, theory and critical practices. To an extent this continues the work begun by Pushpa Naidu Parekh and the contributors to her special issue of *Wagadu* on “Intersecting Gender and Disability Perspectives in Rethinking Postcolonial Identities” (2007), but we see our scholarship as bringing an added focus on critical methodology and the specifics of literary and cultural analyses informed by both Postcolonial Studies and Disability Studies. The main intervention we intend to make is formulated as a call to move away from the “modelling” established as the dominant mode of disability theorizing at present toward more nuanced understandings of disability in relation to cultural difference and situated experience. We believe that for Disability Studies to move forward, it is imperative to interrogate the universal approach to disability naturalized within the social model of disability in particular, and in doing so to enact what might be termed a “decolo-

nization” of Disability Studies in the vein advocated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her important book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999).<sup>3</sup>

Arif Dirlik’s controversial 2002 critique of postcolonial criticism up to that date demonstrated how, “focused on past legacies,” the field was in his opinion “largely oblivious to its own conditions of existence and its relationship to contemporary configurations of power.” Postcolonialism, he went on, “ignores the ways in which its interpretation of the past may serve to promote or, at the least, play into the hands of a globalized capitalism” (440). It is important to recognize that the social model of disability is similarly laden with priorities, value judgements and historical perspectives that are by no means neutral or transparent; Disability Studies’ own “past legacies”—its “interpretation of the past” within a political framework of western minority rights activism—can equally be accused of a lack of self-reflexivity regarding its often relatively privileged “conditions of existence” within systems of “globalized capitalism.” The kind of transnational “disability-and-development” projects (Nepveux and Smith Beitiks 2010) that act in the name of progressive disability politics to change attitudes and conditions in the global South without the necessary awareness of local ideologies and infrastructures to resist their own neocolonizing effects, are an offshoot of this embedded political stance on disability—a version of Gayatri Spivak’s well-known paradigm of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (1999: 287).

Instead of imposing a hegemonic model of disability, then, and assuming that disability will function in comparable ways across disparate cultural texts and contexts, contemporary materialist postcolonial criticism gives us the tools to take particular, situated experiences as the starting

point for disability analysis, enabling acts of criticism *emerging from and informed by* (rather than applied to) “cultural locatedness” in the first instance. In endorsing this method we echo the anthropologists Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Reynolds Whyte who, in *Disability in Local and Global Worlds* (2007), seek to orientate disability research “in the direction of greater differentiation and specificity” (5) instead of the pursuit of overarching disability models. “We are interested in people’s own experiences of what is disabling in their world rather than in some universal definition” (11), they write—a sentiment that resonates with the increasing emphasis on lived experience in the humanities-based scholarship of Siebers and Snyder and Mitchell.

A vital step toward such analysis is the recognition that key Disability Studies concepts, including minority identity, normalcy, and the relationship between impairment and disability, are contingent on cultural difference and may be challenged by situated critical reading practices. In a variety of postcolonial contexts, culturally specific beliefs about embodiment, ontology, communal identity and belonging continue to shape disability experiences. For example, many indigenous communities do not identify with individualist models of impairment; in some American Indian cultures, for instance, “[t]he determination of ‘normalcy’ in health or wellness is dependent on whether or not the individual is in balance with all her relations” (Lovern 2008), including a balance with the natural world. For Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the individuality of impairment is similarly downplayed; “health is viewed as an inter-related phenomenon rather than an intrapersonal one,” meaning that “Māori are more likely to link good or bad health with interpersonal and inter-generational concerns” (Durie 1998: 71, 2). The presence of indigenous or local “cultural models”

of health and disability demonstrates that drawing generalized conclusions about the ways in which postcolonial cultures experience disability cannot account for either the ontological or the material conditions which are formative in constructing disabled lives.

As an agent of biopolitical control, normalcy in particular might not function in the same ways in different cultural contexts. Whereas in the global North, disability theorizing works from the assumption that disability is a minority subject position, and may focus on what Fiona Kumari Campbell calls “debates about the purview of citizenship” for disabled people “in advanced capitalist liberal nation-states,” the case is very different in some postcolonial nation-states where there are instead “disputes regarding the best way to discern the field of not-disability (i.e. the healthy comparator)” (2009: 34). In contexts of chronic poverty or indigenous dispossession, ill health and disability may be widespread enough to shift the thresholds of health and disability, and in communities experiencing mass disablement (due to war, disaster, or industrial accident) people with disabilities often constitute a numerical majority. “Normal” lived experience in postcolonial and developing contexts might *be disabled* experience, drastically altering the categorical and exclusionary implications of “normalcy” and “non-normativity.”

The acclaimed Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi dramatizes these points in a powerful short story, “Shishu” [“Children”] (1993), which details an encounter between an idealistic relief officer, Singh, and an adivasi (tribal) community suffering from the compound crises of poverty, political repression, drought and famine. The narrative climaxes with Singh’s realization that although “[h]e didn’t have the stature of a healthy Russian, Canadian, or American” and he “did not eat food that supplied enough calories for a human body,” when placed in context of the



adivasis' government-sanctioned disablement, his own body—"the ill-nourished and ridiculous body of an *ordinary* Indian" (our emphasis)—represents "the worst possible crime in the history of civilization." By comparison, his "normalcy" (250) appears as obscene privilege. As Singh's "shadow" (250) is cast suggestively over the disabled and infantilized bodies of the adivasis, the narrative displays how, in a deeply stratified postcolonial society where power is exercised differentially, the "normate" (Garland-Thomson 1997: 8) is shadowy, unstable and ultimately elusive. Who sets the standards of embodied normalcy here? The middle-class relief officer who rations food parcels? The government, whose land repossession, taxes and wars have disenfranchised and starved its resistant indigenous citizens? Or the World Health Organization, directly invoked by Singh (250), whose recommendations for calorie consumption render disabled a large proportion of India's population? By complicating normalcy to the point of diffusion, "Shishu" represents an instructive parable for disability analysis informed by postcolonial perspectives. While acknowledging global codes of health and normalcy as a spectral presence in the adivasis' lives, Devi *relativizes* such universalizing standards, foregrounding the local inflections that disable specific bodies in a historicized context of struggle.

### ENVIRONMENT, TRAUMA, DISABLEMENT

Given that the history of colonialism (and its post/neocolonial aftermath) is indeed a history of mass disablement, and that the *acquisition* of disability may be tied into wider patterns of dispossession—the loss of family, home, land, community, employment—there is a pressing need, as we see it, to resist the too-easy censure of narratives that construct disability as loss.

We would caution especially against the blanket rejection and/or critique of medical discourse and medicalized terminology, which may be strategically important when campaigning for resources and raising awareness of (neo)colonial abuses. What individuals in such circumstances experience as loss should not be rendered an invalid response by arguments that fail to recognize the wider contexts and material environments in which disablement occurs.

Any engagement with the environments in which disability is created, especially by war or disaster, and the subsequent involvement of medical practice and discourse, invokes the category of trauma. The relationship between disability and trauma is one that is often cited explicitly in postcolonial literary and cultural narratives but has not yet undergone any sustained critical analysis. In fact, James Berger describes a "discursive abyss" (2004: 563) between disability scholarship and that on trauma, going so far as to say that "disability studies exhibits a significant degree of *denial* with regard to trauma and loss" (572). This is perhaps understandable, given the commitment of Disability Studies to changing perceptions of disability as tragedy or misfortune, but the confluence of disability and trauma in many postcolonial contexts raises a number of vital questions that Disability Studies should posit and attempt to answer. Do we conceptualize trauma as a disability? Or, given that the ways in which individuals acquire disabilities are often compounded by sociopolitical and cultural factors, can disability be considered just one component of the wider category of "trauma"? How do our assumptions about this relationship affect the ways in which disability is treated, administered, represented, and discussed? There are no simple answers to these questions but we would argue that the content of postcolonial narratives suggests that disability criticism

should address this absence in pursuit of a more robust and inclusive theorization of how “loss” may be constituted within disability experiences.

This notion of compound trauma raises the question of whether the term *disability* is adequate in encapsulating the complex manifestations of disabled difference in specific traumatic settings. Anthony Carrigan’s work (2010) draws attention to the particular forms of stigmatization and exclusion suffered by *hibakusha* (“explosion-affected people”) in post-Hiroshima/Nagasaki Japan. Caught between a general fear of radiation sickness and responses generated from the cultural memory of the bombings, the experiences of *hibakusha* are continually conditioned by their implication within the ongoing resonance of a collective trauma. As they negotiate minority subject positions, *hibakusha* potentially undergo all the forms of oppression, discrimination, coalition and activism that we recognize as aspects of disability politics, and yet *disability* as we know it does not wholly account for the range of often fraught interactions between impaired individuals and a society coming to terms with a violent and traumatic history. Once more, the specific cultural and historical meanings of disability experience in postcolonial environments challenge the foundational assumptions, and the suitability of the analytical tools, we would apply to global disability.

As this example makes clear, the production of disability in postcolonial locations involves complicated relationships between cultural and environmental factors. McRuer’s (2010) timely commentary on the 2010 Haitian earthquake highlights how the disabilities caused by a seemingly “natural” disaster are necessarily entangled with economic relations and cultural discourses that form the legacy of colonialism in the state. Just as we believe that *culture* cannot be used as a universal

descriptor for a particular mode of disability theorizing, postcolonial disability experiences may similarly trouble “environment” as it is applied, in the social model, as a generic disabling force. The assumption that, as Siebers puts it, “[t]here is a one-to-one correspondence between the dimensions of the built environment and its preferred social body—the body invited inside as opposed to those bodies not issued an invitation” (2008: 85), becomes irrelevant in the context of Haiti. Events there remind us of the sometimes problematic overemphasis within Disability Studies on the constructedness of environments according to able-bodied norms. Indeed, it could be that the competing claims for territory and resources, alternative conceptions of space and place, or the regularity of destruction in some postcolonial contexts, require that we rethink what is meant by disabling environments. Furthermore, the belief that such environments can be transformed through minority activism, the removal of barriers, and universal design, is symptomatic of a deterministic notion of environmental accessibility which does not account for environments in which exclusion and inaccessibility are by no means unique to people with disabilities.

With this destabilization of human-environment relations in mind, engagements with postcolonial environmental writing can help develop an understanding of disabling postcolonial environments. Rob Nixon points out how “[n]on-Western environmental movements are typically alert to the interdependence of human survival and environmental change” (2005: 243), and postcolonial ecocriticism has recently begun to direct much-needed attention toward the ways in which “environment” functions as “an integrated network of human and non-human agents acting historically” (Mukherjee 2010: 5) rather than simply existing as a stable, transformable, backdrop to human action

in the postcolony. In fact, many of the central issues within postcolonial ecocriticism—the “corporatizing of biodiversity,” “indigenous land rights, community displacement, . . . toxicity, . . . urban or poor rural experience,” “biodegradation, . . . and ‘engineered environments’,” “nuclear testing and nuclear pollution” (Nixon 2005: 243–45) to name just a few—have direct and obvious links to health and disability issues, whether as causal factors of disablement or as contexts that exacerbate the oppression of people with disabilities. Despite postcolonial ecocriticism’s interest in the contingency and fragility of human–environmental interactions, however, it has so far failed to factor the presence of different human bodies, abilities and needs into its “network of human and non-human agents” in any notable way.

Indra Sinha’s Booker Prize-shortlisted novel *Animal’s People* (2007) showcases how a combination of disability and ecocritical perspectives can illuminate the complex interrelations inherent to disabling postcolonial environments. A fictionalization of the Bhopal industrial disaster of 1984, when toxic gas killed thousands of people as well as generating chronic illnesses, disabilities, and reproductive disorders in the years that followed, *Animal’s People* broaches the relationship between environment, disability and the human in its protagonist’s opening statement: “I used to be human once” (1). In the novel, “Animal,” who has a twisted spine and moves on all fours, politicizes his socially inscribed dehumanization and is perceived as “especially abled” (23) due to his unique perspectives and skilled negotiation of his environment. Yet rather than focusing on the presence of disability, Pablo Mukherjee’s analysis of the novel stresses the related concern that to Union Carbide—the multinational corporation implicated in Bhopal—the Indian “victims of gas were expendable because their poverty would

have doomed them to an early death anyway” (2010: 155).<sup>4</sup> Here, in a process Said would recognize only too well, the chain of events by which high-risk environments, poverty, and disability mutually produce and reinforce one another exemplifies the relationships of power that systematically devalue human lives. As a consequence, Sinha’s novel, like Bhopal itself, invites a consideration of disability within the wider discourses of human rights where they intersect with sudden and violent environmental change.

### CONCLUSION: REPRESENTATION, PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY

Sinha’s deliberately provocative construction of his protagonist using animalistic analogies points to another challenge generated by postcolonial disability writing: the need to diversify the terms of our formal analysis. The exposure, problematization, dismantling and deconstruction of oppressive representational practices—and metaphor in particular—remains an incredibly powerful tool within humanities-based disability research, but in thinking about metaphor, we agree with Amy Vidali’s suggestions that criticism should “[refrain] from policing metaphor” and instead “[invite] creative and historic reinterpretations” (2010: 34) of figurative language. This process surely has to include the varying cultural inflections that attach meaning and resonance to impairment.

While disability is frequently used, problematically, as a metaphor for the “damaged” or abject postcolonial body politic, there are many semantic permutations to disability representation. Disability metaphors may be meaningful not just as “crutch[es]” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 49) in the telling of some “other” tale of postcolonial experience, but as part of foundational cultural and historical *disability* narratives; the depiction of scars

in narrative accounts of slavery is just one conspicuous example of this. The situated reading practices we are proposing aim to highlight how particular disability experiences can shape cultural histories and are written into artistic and representational practices. Centrally, this involves consideration of what analogies might signify to the (disabled/postcolonial) community they represent and how they function within a particular literary form and cultural logic, rather than the wholesale dismissal of metaphor as damaging, ableist or stigmatizing. Ralph Savarese's (2010) identification of "postcolonial neurology" is provocative evidence of how creative cross-fertilizations between disability and postcolonial metaphors can service the most radical disability agendas. The idea of the "postcolonial brain," with its challenge to the assumptions that come with the terms *postcolonialism* or *neurology*, is, we feel, exactly the kind of productive criticism that can come when postcolonial and disability thinking are allowed to meet with an openness toward their possible interactions.

It is this sense of the radical and possible that draws us to Edward Said and ideas of democracy and "participatory citizenship." For Said, near the end of his own life and still pursuing the need for a radical engagement with culture, participation meant both the production of criticism and the possibility of democratic agency. "Critique," he wrote, "is always restlessly self-clarifying in search of freedom, enlightenment and more agency, and certainly not their opposites." Working within such terms, he observed, "means situating critique . . . as a form of democratic freedom and as a continuous practice of questioning and accumulating knowledge" (2004: 73, 74). Such statements, we feel, help us to understand that the knowledge we seek to bring to bear on thinking about postcolonial disability requires the scrutiny of such "continuous questioning" if it is to be

of benefit. And they also remind us that, in the widest possible sense, "participation allows for the formation of a full and inclusive idea of citizenship, one radical and yet everyday in its appreciation of the real value of disabled lives.

## NOTES

1. For the most developed discussion of these intersections, see Barker 2011.
2. See, for example, Quayson 1997 and 2000.
3. For Smith, "research" is directly associated with "the worst excesses of colonialism" (1). Her notion of "decolonizing" research involves prioritizing the worldviews of research subjects and ensuring that the products of research—whether material, financial, social or epistemological—are communicated to, and used to benefit, the communities they represent.
4. In contrast, Michael Davidson's reading of Bhopal puts disability at the heart of the disaster when he wryly uses Union Carbide's motto, "Today, something we do will touch your life," as the epigraph to his chapter on disability and globalization (2008: 168).

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